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OBITUARY NOTICE
OF
ROBERT PATTERSON, LL.D.

Late President of the American Philosophical Society.

It has been a custom in this Society, that on the death of the President, an oration in honour of the deceased should be delivered by one of the Members; and it was very much the wish of the Society that this tribute of respect should have been paid to their late worthy and respected President **DR. ROBERT PATTERSON**. It was omitted, however, in consequence of his positive request, communicated by the friend who attended him during his last illness. Nevertheless it was thought proper that a short memorial of his useful and well spent life should be placed on the records of the Society.

Robert Patterson was born on the 30th of May, 1743, near Hillsborough, in the north of Ireland. His family was respectable, though not affluent. His great-grandfather, John, emigrated from Scotland during the persecution of the Presbyterians by the house of Stewart, and suffered with his fellow Protestants at the memorable siege of Derry. The subject of this Memoir was sent to school at an early age, and soon became distinguished for his love of learning. He was particularly conspicuous for his progress in Mathematics. To this object, indeed, his genius so strongly impelled him, that in a short time he was able to give lessons to his master.

The French having made a descent on the coast of Ireland about the year 1759, a martial spirit was excited in the youth of that kingdom which became universal. Patterson, then a youth of sixteen, burning with patriotic ardour, was enrolled in a militia company, of which he was made serjeant. He devoted himself to his military exercises, and soon became so distinguished for his skill and good conduct, as to attract the attention of the officers of a British regiment stationed near Hillsborough, who offered to procure him a commission, if he would go into the King's service. This he declined; the duties of civil life being more congenial to his nature. He chose rather to remain in a situation where he might pursue his studies, while he enjoyed the society of his family. Having completed his education, he determined to try his fortune in America; and accordingly embarked for Philadelphia, where he arrived, in October, 1768, without friends, and almost without money, having shared with a fellow passenger the contents of his slender purse.

On his arrival in Philadelphia, he visited some of the members of the religious society to which he belonged, and was received by them with great kindness

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and hospitality. One of them indeed went so far as to offer him the loan of a sum of money sufficient to establish him in mercantile business. Though he did not accept this offer, having determined to make the business of teaching the main object of his life, yet he remembered it to his last moment with unceasing gratitude.

After spending a week in Philadelphia, he set out on foot for Bucks County, for the purpose of seeking employment as a schoolmaster. In this he was successful. He was immediately engaged in his favourite pursuit. His first school was in Buckingham, and one of his first scholars Andrew Ellicott, afterwards celebrated for his mathematical knowledge displayed in the service of the United States. In no part of the world is more respect paid to that truly respectable character, the instructor of youth, than in the United States. Instances are frequent, where those who have commenced their career as schoolmasters have risen to the highest honours of the State. This is a sound feeling, and as long as it prevails there will be no danger of want of education.

The regular publication of the Nautical Almanac, established by Dr. Maskelyne about the time when Patterson taught in Buckingham, turned the attention of the principal navigators in the American ports to the calculations of the longitude from lunar observations, in which they were eager to obtain instruction. Availing himself of this desire, he removed to Philadelphia, where he soon had for his scholars the most distinguished commanders who sailed from this port.

In the year 1771, the parents of Dr. Patterson, two of his brothers, and two sisters, attracted no doubt by his success and the encouraging accounts received from him, came to this country. One of his brothers, a presbyterian clergyman, is still living, at Pittsburg, and one of his sisters, a widow lady, in Philadelphia. In the year 1772, having accumulated the sum of five or six hundred pounds, he was persuaded by a friend whom he consulted, to invest it in merchandise, and open a country store in New Jersey. But never was there a man less fitted for this business. His books indeed were kept with mathematical correctness; but to the drudgery of a retail salesman he was unequal. Every customer seemed an intruder who detained him from his studies. He was soon sensible that nature never designed him for a store keeper. He seized therefore the first opportunity of closing his mercantile concern, and resuming his former avocation. This he was enabled to do to advantage, being appointed Principal of the Academy at Wilmington, in the State of Delaware, about the beginning of the year 1774. On the 9th of May, in the same year, he was married to Ame Ewing, daughter of Maskell Ewing, Esq. of Greenwich, Cumberland County, New Jersey. With this lady, who has now the misfortune of lamenting his death, he lived in the most affectionate union for upwards of fifty years. They had eight children, two of whom died in infancy. His son Robert, with hereditary talents improved by liberal education, succeeded his father in the office of Vice-Provost of the University of Pennsylvania some years before his death, and fills his place with great reputation. About the time that Dr. Patterson took charge of the Academy at Wilmington, the differences between Great Britain and her colonies were hastening to a crisis. The First Congress, assembled at Philadelphia in the autumn of the year 1774, gave intimations to the people that it would be prudent to prepare for the event; and immediately after the battle of Lexington in April, 1775, the whole country by an unanimous impulse formed itself into associations for the purpose of learning the military exercise. So ignorant

were they of every thing like military art, that every person who could perform the common manual exercise became a man of consequence, and was looked up to by his neighbours. Then it was that Dr. Patterson reaped the fruits of his youthful labours in Ireland. Ardently devoted to the cause of the colonies, he tendered his services as a military instructor, which were thankfully accepted. Three companies were put under his direction, whom he attended before sunrise in the morning, and after the dismissal of the school in the afternoon. Saturday was the field day, when all the companies met, and were trained together. As soon as the militia of Delaware were organised by authority, he received from the Committee of Public Safety the commission of adjutant in a regiment commanded by Colonel, afterwards Governor, M'Kinley. Soon after the Declaration of Independence, many students in the Wilmington Academy from the West Indies and the Southern States were called home, and the duties of the Professors were suspended. Under these circumstances, Dr. Patterson, determining to share the fate of the country, removed to a small farm which he had purchased in the neighbourhood of his father in law, in New Jersey. Having placed his family in safety, he went into service with the militia who were opposed to the enemy. After the disastrous campaign of 1776, he returned to his family, but had not been at home a week, when the militia were again called out to immediate service, the British army having almost overrun the State of New Jersey. He did not hesitate to obey the call, and repaired immediately, with his rifle on his shoulder, to the appointed rendezvous, with the intention of serving in the ranks. But before the troops were ready to march, he received from Governor Livingston the commission of brigade major, with orders to join General Newcombe's brigade. In this office he was honourably engaged in active service, until the British army evacuated Philadelphia and New Jersey in 1773, when the brigade was disbanded.

The critical period in the destiny of the United States was now past. The capture of Burgoyne's army and the alliance with France afforded a moral certainty of the ultimate establishment of their independence. Such was the confident opinion of the people, and accordingly they began to turn their thoughts towards civil affairs, and the important business of education. The old College and Academy of Philadelphia were new modelled, their foundation enlarged, and a University created. Patterson was well acquainted with Dr. Ewing, the Provost of the University, and applied to him for employment as a mathematical teacher. The Provost received him with great kindness, and told him he was the very man they wanted, and advised him to offer himself without delay to the Board of Trustees as a candidate for the Professorship of Mathematics. In consequence of this advice, he entered into the University in December, 1779. He was appointed first a Professor and afterwards Vice-Provost, in which station he continued until the year 1814, when he resigned, and was succeeded by his son. During this long period he performed his official duty with great integrity, industry, and ability, and rendered essential services to the University and the country. This was his proper sphere. With laborious application he ran the course which nature had pointed out, and his efforts were crowned with complete success. But arduous as were his duties in the University, he found time for other useful employments. Being highly esteemed by his fellow citizens, he was elected a member of the Select Council of Philadelphia, of which he was chosen President in 1799. In this assembly his habits of business, and his love of order and regularity, were extremely

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serviceable. Of this the Council were very sensible, and on his resignation honoured him with an unanimous vote of thanks.

In the year 1805, he received from Mr. Jefferson, President of the United States, with whom he had been in habits of friendship, the unsolicited appointment of Director of the national Mint. This office he filled with great reputation until his last illness, when he resigned, and his son in law, Dr. Moore, was appointed by President Monroe in his place.

In the year 1816 the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania, in testimony of their approbation of his long tried talents and services, conferred on him the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws.

That he should be a Fellow of the American Philosophical Society was a matter of course. He was elected in 1783, and remained an active, zealous, and useful Member to the time of his death. He was chosen Secretary in 1784, Vice-President in 1799, and ultimately in 1819 raised to the Chair which had been filled by Franklin, Rittenhouse, Jefferson, and Wistar. His zeal for the interests of this Institution was always conspicuous, and he conducted himself during his Presidency to the entire satisfaction of the Society.

Nature had been liberal to Dr. Patterson. She endued him with strength of body and solidity of understanding. His mind was peculiarly adapted to the exact sciences, in which he made considerable progress, and was certainly a distinguished teacher. He was not however satisfied in any case with mere abstract mathematical truth, but always sought for its application to some practical purpose. This appears from his works which are all elementary, and his numerous papers published among the Transactions of our Society. His practical knowledge of mathematics was held in high estimation. Our most ingenious mechanicians were in the constant habit of resorting to his judgment and advice. But one, and the most important, trait in his character is yet to be mentioned,—his *fervent and unremitted piety*. From early youth to the last moment of his protracted life, it penetrated and pervaded his whole mind, and influenced all his conduct. He belonged to what is commonly called the Scotch Presbyterian Church, of which he was an elder nearly half a century, and which will long have cause to lament his loss.

His constitution was so remarkably strong, that he reached the limit of his long existence almost without sickness, and was even robust until within a few months of his death. At length the powers of life gave way, and, without pain, and apparently without disease, he died on the 22d of July, 1824, in the 82d year of his age.